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## ROMA PEOPLE IN VIRTUAL REALITY<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT** Stereotypical perceptions of Roma people as those who like to walk along forest paths to camps, or stories about Gypsy fairies with crystal balls have nothing in common with such trendy and contemporary terms as new technologies. How can one imagine a stereotypical Roma who loves horses and campfires surfing the Internet? How do we discuss changes in men-women relations in the context of a patriarchal community in which women have no right to express their opinions and are literally captive? Undoubtedly, a lack of knowledge about Roma people, and with often the only alternative in the form of stereotypical information excludes them from the discussion on cultural changes related to technological development. At the same time media, including the Internet, are important not only in the context of activism of Roma leaders and organizations, but also with reference to people who want to fight against the negative image of Roma people in public space, regardless of membership or lack of membership in Roma organizations.

**Key words:** Romani people, Gypsy, Roma people, internet, stereotypes, identity

<sup>1</sup> The conclusions presented in this paper are based on available sources, participant observation and the results of research conducted from 2008 to 2011, when I was working on my doctoral thesis and then the book entitled *Wpływ aktywności finansowej Unii Europejskiej na położenie społeczne Romów w Polsce (Influence of the European Union Financial Activity on the Social Position of the Roma People in Poland)*, Kraków 2013.

*We live in the consumer society.  
I am pretty sure we will get rid of 'primitive peoples', when it turns out  
they neither meet purity criteria specified by intellectuals,  
nor are they personification of Nature, in fact being  
much more 'fake' and 'civilized' than us.*

Hans Peter Duerr

In their considerations and forecasts Alvin and Heidi Toffler, American sociologists and political scientists, focused on the technical development they found as a crucial factor having impact on economic and cultural transformation. The researchers proved that the contemporary world has been shaped by three waves, respectively symbolized by a hoe, a production line and a computer.<sup>2</sup> *The first wave sector provides farming products and raw materials, the second one is a source of cheap manpower and mass production, while third wave sector domination is based on new methods of acquisition and usage of knowledge. The nations of the third wave sell to the world information and innovations, sophisticated and mass culture, advanced technologies, computer software, education skills, medical care and variety of services.*<sup>3</sup> Following their way of thinking, it is not difficult to conclude which Toffler wave we are currently witnessing, as the third wave is related to development of new technologies, enabling unlimited flows of information.

According to the Tofflers, a new civilization means a new lifestyle in all aspects. While we can argue with the theses defined by the authors, we cannot doubt that we are living through extremely dynamic and intense social and cultural transformations resulting from technological development. These innovations, like instantaneous communication and access to mobility, have significant influence on all societies and cultures, proving once again that there is no such thing as a cultural *status quo*. The above-mentioned changes also refer to cultures defined as traditional, including the Roma culture, which is not only perceived as homogenous, but also as continuously connected to values or standards known for generations. Is this really so? Is knowledge of standards and rules always related to their observance in normal life? It surely often is, although changes related to technological and civilization development undoubtedly do not omit Roma communities.

Stereotypical perceptions of Roma people as those who like to walk along forest paths to camps, or stories about Gypsy fairies with crystal balls, have nothing in common with such trendy and contemporary terms as new technologies. How can one imagine a stereotypical Roma who loves horses and campfires surfing the Internet? How do we discuss changes in men-women relations in the context of a patriarchal

<sup>2</sup> A. H. Toffler, *Budowa nowej cywilizacji. Trzecia fala*, Poznań 1996; idem, *Trzecia fala*, Warszawa 1997; idem, *Szok przyszłości*, Poznań 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, *Budowa nowej...*, pp. 17-31.

community in which women have no right to express their opinions and are literally captive? Undoubtedly, a lack of knowledge about Roma people, and with often the only alternative in the form of stereotypical information excludes them from the discussion on cultural changes related to technological development. At the same time reality has nothing in common with concepts mentioned here. In order to shed light on this issue, I will refer to the analysis of contemporary Roma identities by Sławomir Kaprański, who stated *that investigation of Roma identities is simultaneously like a curse and like a blessing. A blessing, because literally everything can be said about Roma people and you can always find a group this will be a true statement for. A curse, because whatever we say about Roma people, there will always be a group that will argue with it.*<sup>4</sup> The author draws attention not only to the enormous diversification of the Roma community, but also underlines how important it is for researchers and scientists of Roma-related topics to take a flexible and variety-oriented approach.

Despite the difficulties related to classification and investigation of Roma people discussed by Kaprański in his paper *Tożsamość romska* (*The Roma identity*),<sup>5</sup> he refers to four tendencies popular among scientists in the field of Roma identity. I will focus on the cultural approach that is characteristic of cultural anthropology and crucial for my subsequent considerations.

According to the cultural approach, “being a Roma (Romanipen)” and Roma behaviour are analyzed and explained in the context of the values giving people a sense of purpose and leading them in their interactions with the world of social<sup>6</sup> and cultural standards. Though it is difficult to clearly define which standards and values are the most important, A. Giddens nevertheless lists several Roma culture-focused keystones he uses as a point of reference for his analysis. The first one is Indian heritage, although, citing Ian Hancock, he underlines that the Roma as a group emerged in Europe along with their language, although in this context there are some doubts because as a result of assimilation processes and persecutions some Roma people do not speak the Romani language. Another important element in the context of analysis of Roma values is division into a zone of purity and a zone of impurity, and the resulting division of activities, rituals, rites, etc. With reference to this aspect there are also many differences among Roma groups. Not all members of the community know the same rules and observe them. Group membership and many other conditions are important in this matter. Another important keystone related to Roma values is the rule of seniority, the respect paid to elderly persons. The rule of group solidarity and sense of community with all Roma people is another important element of the Roma culture. The last Roma element discussed is related to life among the Roma community and limited contacts with the non-Roma milieu.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> S. Kaprański, “Tożsamość romska”, in C. Obracht-Prondzyński, B. Dejna, *Świat Cyganów. Problemy Romów*, Gdańsk 2017, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-27.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The keystones described above, crucial in the context of the Roma axiomatic and normative system described by Kapralski and related to cultural approaches in the discussion on the Roma identity, are very often cited by authors of papers on Roma culture. It should be admitted that this is especially crucial in the context of the lack of knowledge on Roma people as a rule. Nevertheless, despite the significant need to publish papers in this matter, we should admit there are none referring to changes in the Roma culture. We can hypothetically assume the influence of several factors. First, as it has already been said, knowledge of the Roma culture among majority societies is scarce. Moreover, debates or discussions on Roma people focus mostly on social exclusion, social problems, or discrimination. When compared to the variety of problems of this largest European minority, the culture of Roma people is not an important topic to be discussed. Secondly, Roma people are perceived, also by academics, as a hermetic group not allowing non-Roma people to acquire information about them. Such a belief is often not verified in the research process, as no research has been taken up. Conviction about barriers dividing Roma and non-Roma people is reflected in the mentality of those who wish to write or conduct research on Roma people. It can be surely admitted that it is indeed difficult to get to informers of Roma origin. We can see some distance between groups and serious distrust or even reluctance in Roma people, being a result of negative experiences in the past. However, it does not mean that such research is impossible. Let me recall the efforts of ethnographers and anthropologists who reached investigated communities struggling with various problems and difficulties. Let me also cite the prime mover of site research, Bronisław Malinowski, the notable Polish ethnographer who conducted his research on the Trobriand Islands. It resulted in important publications and guidelines on site research, as he was quite aware of the numerous difficulties a researcher encounters along the way. Malinowski investigated remote communities that were different culturally and linguistically, dealing with many problems related to contact and communication with the subjects of the research. He described subsequent stages of his research and related the difficulties and his emotions linked to the research process in his diary,<sup>8</sup> which is available and well-worth recommending to all who are preparing or conducting site research. Time has passed and ways of conducting research have significantly changed, but Malinowski's diary is still relevant and it is worth recalling that research almost always comes with problems and difficulties, not only of the methodological kind. Getting to informers and thus information on a group phenomena has never been easy, although it is not impossible. Thus, referring to the community described in this paper, establishing contact is surely difficult and time-consuming, but there are many methods to contact and conduct research among Roma people, including conservative or hermetical groups.

Research and more specifically its effects, are extremely important not only in the context of social or cultural sciences, but also with reference to the lack of knowledge and stereotypical beliefs about Roma people. Unfortunately, there are some gaps regarding this matter, which can be also linked to the approach of researchers to the

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<sup>8</sup> B. Malinowski, *Dziennik w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu*, Kraków 2002.

community. Let me once again cite Kapralski, who referring to research on Roma genocide describes the approach of researchers to this community, which can be generalized to research on Roma people. Kapralski concludes that both scientists investigating the Holocaust and those conducting research on Roma people did not treat them as genocide victims. They became subject to other discussions and the group was perceived as a people with a separate, objectively established and preserved ethnic identity, significantly resistant to changes resulting from historical events.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, it was underlined that to Roma people the collective past is not of great importance, as only the present matters and this is why they have not written down their history and memoirs or commemorated events important to that community. In the introduction to the book, "Cyganie. Odmienność i nietolerancja (*Gypsies. Otherness and intolerance*)" by Lech Mróz and Andrzej Mirga, the Reverend Józef Tischner writes that for the Roma people, without a written history or historical memory, remembrance of historical events did not allow them to feel joy for the future. With these words the author draws attention to the long history of persecutions against and discrimination towards this community. According to Tischner, forgetting tragic events has made it possible to continue and feel joy for the future.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, according to Kapralski, saying that Roma are a people without history as they have not been preserving it, is an example of their marginalization in historiography.<sup>11</sup> This example perfectly depicts how important the approach a researcher takes towards certain matters or entire groups is. Ignoring Roma people in research on the Holocaust perpetuates the problem of lack of sufficient information on the genocide and remembrance of Roma people. This is a serious lacuna not only in research on Roma history, but also generally in the history of Europe. Let us remember that, similarly to topics related to genocide and remembrance, the Roma culture has for a long time not been a subject of academic interest. While we can see some progress in research on genocide and remembrance, research and publications on the Roma culture generally remains on the descriptive, ethnographic level. Thus, cultural changes and influence of external factors on cultures of Roma communities are still a topic to be hopefully investigated and described, as there is no doubt that Roma people and their cultures are not resistant to external influence. Having less or more intense interactions with the societies they co-exist with, they profit from available goods and assets and make use of the behaviour patterns occurring in dominant groups. Even if they had been an extremely hermetical group, to live in social or cultural limbo is not possible nowadays. Spatial proximity itself is related to cultural contact and affiliated processes. All external factors related to technological development having impact on all social lifestyle areas also matter, so today much attention is drawn to the cultural impact of globalization. According to Giddens, images, styles and other goods are dispersed faster than ever. Trade, new technologies, migrations and media facilitate free transfer of cultural content through

<sup>9</sup> S. Kapralski, *Naród z popiołów. Pamięć zagłady a tożsamość Romów*, Warszawa 2012, p. 208.

<sup>10</sup> L. Mróz, A. Mirga, *Cyganie. Odmienność i nietolerancja*, Warszawa 1994, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> S. Kapralski, *Naród z popiołów...*, pp. 211-213.

state borders<sup>12</sup> transforming the world into a 'global village',<sup>13</sup> where each human being lives the life of the entire world.<sup>14</sup> Thanks to globalization and development of new technologies, in particular the Internet, people can listen to the same music, wear the same brands of clothes and watch films or news programmes regardless of where they live or what culture they belong to, although we should bear in mind that there are still societies living outside McLuhan's global village, with limited or no access to information.<sup>15</sup> Thus, let me underline that 'global village' connotes democratization of social life in the context of common access to media, while it is worth mentioning that limitation or blocking access to them confirms existence of the role played in the contemporary world by, inter alia, mass media in various forms like newspapers, television, films, magazines, radio, commercials and computer games. Technological progress and development of the Internet have been significantly changing traditional media, and this creates new standards of communication and information flow. As mentioned above, all this has significant impact on our actions, experience and opinions, widening the scope of human capabilities, although simultaneously interfering with the existing balance, thus irreversibly changing societies.<sup>16</sup>

The mentioned changes do not exclude so-called traditional communities, though it is worth mentioning these changes occur much more slowly than in other communities, which can be related to mechanisms protecting against imposed lifestyles and ways of thinking. Referring to Roma people, I will once again cite S. Kapralski and his analysis of Roma identities. He cites, among others, Michael Stewart and his social (constructionist) concept of Roma identities, according to which the *culture of Roma communities is explained by the character of social relations connecting them with others, thus the character of social relations connecting Roma people with the majority of the society makes them use specific cultural assets in order to create a certain defense system, their own world where they would feel safe*<sup>17</sup>. This defense system is simply made up of cultural standards that are supposed to clearly define borders between Roma and non-Roma people. The stronger the pressure and influence from outside assumed to impose a certain model of behaviour or lifestyle that is strange to this group, the stronger the emphasizing of cultural distinctiveness of a group. The phenomenon that can be described as cultural defense is not exclusive to Roma communities, as it can be also observed in other groups and nations. It is worth mentioning the 'Arab Spring' that divided the Arab world and paved the way for the origins of both democratization and radicalization in that region.<sup>18</sup> Regarding Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska's book *Arabska*

<sup>12</sup> A. Giddens, *Socjologia*, Warszawa 2006, p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York 1964.

<sup>14</sup> J. Ortega y Gasset, *Bunt mas*, Warszawa 2006, pp. 38-39.

<sup>15</sup> For example North Korea.

<sup>16</sup> M. McLuhan, *Wybór tekstów*, Poznań 2001, p. 328.

<sup>17</sup> S. Kapralski, *Tożsamość romska...*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>18</sup> K. Górak-Sosnowska, *Arabska Wiosna. Kulturowy obraz przemian w świecie arabskim po 2010 roku*, Sopot 2016; <http://geopolityka.org/publikacje/bartosz-mroczkowski-bliski-wschod-po-roku-arabskiej-wiosny>, 16 October 2017.

*Wiosna. Kulturowy obraz przemian w świecie arabskim po 2010 roku (The Arab Spring. Cultural changes in the Arab world after 2010)*, Prof. Marek Dziekan states that *culture turns out to be equally fragile to political events as politics itself*.<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to argue with this view, as it is possible to cite many more examples proving it is culture and remembrance of past times, especially in situations endangering the cultural identity of a group, that become a barrier rigidly defining interethnic or intercultural borders. Regarding Roma people, Prof. Lech Mróz underlines that *fear against presence in the form of mass culture, new patterns of social behaviour and cultural unification made actual references to the past the main method present in efforts to preserve relations within the group and its identity*.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, this is not always possible. We have known restrictive and discriminative actions and regulations from the past aimed at weakening relations within Roma groups and the destruction of the Roma culture. Let us mention in this context political actions targeted against Roma people living in Europe. Totalitarian systems and repressions aimed at this community have resulted in the disappearance of important cultural habits and even the language. This was the case of Roma people in Hungary and Spain, where the Romani language has been forgotten and most of the Roma people living in these countries, as a result of persecution, do not speak it. Nevertheless, we can observe different tendencies and produce examples where these repressive actions against Roma people have strengthened group traditions and had impact on the degree of separation of some Roma groups, for example in countries of post-communist Europe inhabited by Roma groups living nomadic lives as late as in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a result of persecutions of communist authorities aimed at destruction of the Roma culture, cultural standards and thus sanctions related to their observance did strengthen their purpose to preserve their cultural separateness and fight to live in compliance with the imperative rules of the group. As a result of these circumstances, interethnic borders have been indeed marked more explicitly. Thus, in this context the separateness of Roma people should be related to an attempt to protect themselves against the threatening and dangerous external world, where any deviations from standards were severely punished. A perfect example of such an approach is the Polish-Romani poet and singer Papusza, who was accused of betrayal of Roma secrets and the Romani language. In the past it was unthinkable. In a conversation with Krzysztof Kornacki, Roman Kwiatkowski recalls this, drawing attention to circumstances in the context of a threat from the non-Roma world in that time: *As a child I was living in a camp and heard time after time how Papusza disclosed our language, that she is odd, evil and started to cooperate with authorities. We should realize what kind of times we were living in. Roma people just survived war-time drama, left concentration camps, ghettos, stopped to hide, escaped from a totalitarian system. We know what happened to Czech, Polish, German and Slovak Roma people. Ewa Just and Robert Ritter had been conducting various racial research. Any cooperation with that odd world, that totalitarian system was completely*

<sup>19</sup> K. Górak-Sosnowska, *Arabska Wiosna...*

<sup>20</sup> L. Mróz, "Między tradycją a współczesnością. Rozterki liderów romskich", in T. Paleczny, J. Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, *Tożsamość kulturowa Romów w procesach globalizacji*, Kraków 2008, p. 43.



*impossible. When I was a child, I was told that a non-Roma was an alien and that I should run and hide from him. (...) I would not like to be in Papisza's shoes those times.*<sup>21</sup> The opinion of Mr. Kwiatkowski perfectly depicts the aforesaid conclusion. The more serious the threat, the higher the degree of separateness. Sanctions for breaking Roma rules were also more severe, as is proven by Kwiatkowski's opinion that he would not like to be in Papisza's shoes. I am not going to deliberate on events from the past and focus on whether Papisza was guilty or not. I am interested in the consequences she had to suffer for her alleged betrayal of Roma secrets, as she was punished very severely and banished from the Roma community, which seriously impacted her later fate and health. This was the most severe punishment imposed on a member of the Polska Roma group for breaking the fundamental rules to be observed in the group. One of them was providing information on Roma culture and lifestyle and popularization of the Romani language among non-Roma people. There were no 'extenuating circumstances'. Disclosure of the Romani language and values cherished by Roma people was then unthinkable, as proven by the punishment imposed on Papisza.

Several decades have passed since then. It seems to be a long period, nevertheless, considering the changes that have occurred during this time, we can say that with reference to culture of Roma people they are quite dynamic. Many things have changed since the times of Papisza regarding the language and distance between the Roma and majority communities. Nowadays, texts in the Romani language are published and websites of some Roma organizations also provide versions in their language.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, nobody is being accused of breaking Roma rules.

Changes in perception of areas related to cultural standards among Roma people in Poland have been surely influenced by political transformation which, apart from the radical change of the political situation in Poland, has had significant impact on the attitude of authorities towards national and ethnic minorities. A breakthrough Tadeusz Mazowiecki's announcement of September 12, 1989: *Poland is a country and homeland not only for Poles. We live together with representatives of other nations. We want them to feel here like home, to take care of their languages, to enrich their cultures and our society.*<sup>23</sup> Thus, authorities of the Polish state not only recognized existence of national minorities in Poland, but also accepted the rights of these persons to maintain their ethnic and cultural identity. As a result of democratization of the political system, restrictions on establishment of associations and political activity of citizens have also been lifted, also with reference to minority communities. This subsequently enabled Roma non-governmental organizations with social and political aspirations to operate. Besides the

<sup>21</sup> "Z taboru bylam teraz znikad jestem. O filmie «Papisza» z Prezesem Stowarzyszenia Romow w Polsce Romanem Kwiatkowskim rozmawia Krzysztof Kornacki", in C. Obracht- Prondzyński, B. Dejna (eds.), *Świat Cyganów...*, pp. 508-509.

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. the website of the Polish Roma Association at <<http://www.romowie.com/old/index.php?newlang=romani>>, 16 October 2017.

<sup>23</sup> R. Breyer, "Polityka Republiki Federalnej Niemiec wobec mniejszości niemieckiej w III Rzeczypospolitej", in A. Sakson (ed.), *Polska – Niemcy. Mniejszość niemiecka w Wielkopolsce. Przyszłość i teraźniejszość*, Poznań 1994, p. 169.



protection and popularization of culture and educational activities, their goal is political representation of Roma interests.

One organization with such ambitions is the Association of Roma in Poland,<sup>24</sup> established in Oświęcim in 1992. The scope of the activities of the association, operating throughout Poland, is focused on culture, education and research. It also intervenes in cases of discrimination and conflicts affecting members of the Roma community. One of the co-founders of the association and its first president was a Bergitka Rom, while his deputy and the second cofounder was a member of the Polska Roma group. The organization's activity has been approved by the Shero Rom, which was a breakthrough in the context of cultural differences and distance between the two groups, proving the occurrence of changes in Roma communities, as described by Lech Mróz: *cooperation between persons belonging to different communities divided by distance and prejudice did not result from their reluctance to tradition or from will to stand against the elderly and traditional leaders. It became possible as a result of changes occurring in both communities, in particular in the way of thinking among younger generations, though already grown up, educated and not closed within their own group. These are people who knew other countries and other Roma communities and were aware of changes occurring in the Gypsy (Roma's, Sinti's and other's) world in Europe. They were led by the conviction that status and social position can be changed only as a result of common activities and that there are more things connecting than dividing them, that building of the national community requires past divisions among groups to be removed.*<sup>25</sup>

Another organization active in Poland and in the field of politics is the Central Roma Council, established in 1997 in Białystok. Its president was the initiator of the first Roma magazine, called *Rrom p-o drom*.<sup>26</sup> Several years later the abovementioned Association of Roma in Poland began publishing a magazine on Roma matters called *Dialog-Pheniben*,<sup>27</sup> in which some of the articles were written in Romani dialects.

<sup>24</sup> One of the most important aspects of the association's activities is restoration of Roma genocide remembrance of World War II. With this purpose, documentation from wartime and relations of survivors has been collected. In cooperation with the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau it participated in works related to published register of the Gypsy camp in Oświęcim and to establishment of a permanent exhibition on genocide of European Roma during the war. Moreover, the association initiates and organizes annual events commemorating liquidation of the so-called Zigeunerlager at KL Auschwitz-Birkenau, at <[www.stowarzyszenie.romowie.net](http://www.stowarzyszenie.romowie.net)>, 16 October 2017.

<sup>25</sup> L. Mróz, *Między tradycją...*, p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> The magazine is partially published in the Romani language and partially in Polish. Its editor-in-chief and founder was Stanisław Stankiewicz. The magazine discusses the most important matters and problems related to life and activities of the Roma community in Poland and abroad, including assimilation of Roma people and maintaining of Roma tradition and culture. It makes efforts to fight against existing divisions and prejudice. *Rrom p-o Drom* presents current problems Polish Roma are interested in, but it also pays attention to the past and publishes articles describing Roma history. An important part of each edition of *Rrom p-o-Drom* are texts describing Roma culture: musicians, poets, writers, opinions on records and books and announcements on cultural events and publishing news. *Rrom p-o Drom* also publishes poetry and short literature forms, at [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rrom\\_p-o\\_Drom](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rrom_p-o_Drom), 16 October 2017.

<sup>27</sup> *Dialog-Pheniben* is a social and cultural quarterly journal published by the Association of Roma in Poland since 1995. It focuses on social and cultural issues of the Roma minority in Poland and Europe

As time went by, other new local, regional and national organizations have been established in Poland.<sup>28</sup> There are currently several dozen of them here, although it is the 1990s which witnessed the rapid spurt of Roma organizations. Jean Pierre-Liégeois<sup>29</sup> estimates that in the 1990s there were approximately a thousand Roma organizations which, according to Małgorzata Kołaczek, should be connected with the downfall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe and this subsequent expansion of the European Union.<sup>30</sup> Thus, financial opportunities arose as there was a need to perform activities aimed at improvement of the difficult situation of Roma communities in social, educational and labour-market related matters. It was also necessary to conduct initiatives aimed at popularization of Roma history and culture and fighting against negative stereotypes.

Currently, this is possible as there are better and better educated Roma leaders speaking multiple languages. They play the role of 'intermediaries' between the communities they represent and local or national authorities. They lead organizations intended to have, inter alia, a positive impact on the image of the Roma, thanks to financial budgetary assets. Subsequently, cooperation with the non-Roma communities is necessary and it seems to be partially approved by those who are the most important in Roma communities, the elderly, who often benefit from this support. However, this does not mean there are no conflicts in this matter, all the more so since order related to hierarchy becomes unstable because of age. Elderly persons act on a different basis in Roma communities and they are generally not active in the scope of activities of younger leaders. They are wardens of tradition and authorities, as they possess worldly wisdom, something not related to diplomas or formal education, but to age. Younger leaders often underline the role of tradition and the opinions of the elderly, as they do not want to lose their approval and thus be deprived of entitlement to represent the community outside. At the same time, they are aware that the role of a Roma representative and a partner for representatives of authorities or institutions is related to appropriate competences like education, knowledge of the political and social context, etc. Their position is to some extent dualistic and related to changes in the internal structure and hierarchy of Roma communities, thus it is interesting how Roma people themselves react to these changes. It is worth citing the results of Małgorzata Kołaczek's research on defining what makes a Roma leader, conducted from 2008 to 2010 in Hungary, Slovakia and Poland. On the basis of the respondent's opinions, being members of Roma communities, the author created a list of attributes proving one to be, in their opinion, a Roma leader:

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and topics related to protection of human rights, tolerance and counteracting discrimination, racism and xenophobia. Its goal is to popularize the multi-dimensional world of Roma people among readers by scientific journalistic methods and in the form of materials based on experience of journalists and photographers, at <<http://stowarzyszenie.romowie.net/Dialog-Pheniben-103.html>>, 16 October 2017.

<sup>28</sup> More information on Roma organizations can be found in the text called *Działalność romskich organizacji społecznych po 1989 roku* by M. Kołaczek.

<sup>29</sup> J. Pierre-Liégeois, *Roma in Europe*, Strasbourg 2007, pp. 218-219.

<sup>30</sup> M. Kołaczek, "Transgresja pojęcia lidera romskiego", in T. Paleczny, J. Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, *Transgresja w kulturze*, Kraków 2014, p. 114.

1. **selflessness:** *a leader must be completely dedicated and independent in order to represent the Roma community, putting their own interests second; they must identify various problems, which is possible only when they cooperate with grassroots groups;*
2. **ability to coordinate** *the various problems related to social life: I would probably find the ability to coordinate as the most important character feature, because everything is connected with everything, from social problems to cultural values;*
3. **tenacity in the fight for the interests of the community,** *even if there is little chance for success: a Roma leader should face challenges, wish to achieve something and constantly fight for the cause, putting their interest aside, even if this matter cannot result in success;*
4. **having support and legitimization in the Roma community,** *although on the basis of resulting effects, because saying that "I am an intelligent and good person" is not enough, so legitimization must be based on the effects of a leader's activities, of being a leader. (...) Roma leaders are not politicians, they are people respected by the Roma community;*
5. **ability to live in two worlds,** *Roma and non-Roma people (...) must be able to be active in this second world, to participate in meetings, conferences, to meet with people, to lobby, i.e. to be a good manager and a person struggling with the fact that the Roma image is negative;*
6. **mental strength,** *because currently it is very difficult to be a Roma leader, because the community is diversified, I am not sure if it is possible to meet everyone's expectations. (...) Mental strength, because I think that if among such a community there is some activist, an association president, there are enormous expectations. (...) they generally think that if someone is a leader and meets the minister, they surely have plenty of money and if we have elected you down here for a president and cannot afford to buy coal, then what kind of president are you? There is the great problem related to lack of knowledge;*
7. **making efforts to unite Roma people,** *because a leader should try to unite all Roma people to keep them together and make the Roma community homogenous;*
8. **education, competences, managerial skills and support for education:** *Roma leaders should be educated, communicative, professional in their scope of interests, be expert in legal matters, they should clearly know what they want to achieve; a model leader should be able to motivate people to self-develop and gain skills that will be crucial in their own development, as well as development of the communities they work with;*
9. **awareness of their own origins and pride in it:** *it is their duty and advantage (SL5); a leader is a person accepting their own Roma identity.<sup>31</sup>*

According to these statements, a Roma leader should be able to act in two worlds, those of the Roma and the non-Roma. They should be trusted and supported by the community they represent, while on the other hand they should have various competences enabling them to represent Roma people within majority communities. This

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 117-118.

is undoubtedly the great change related to the structure and internal organization of Roma people, but most of all related to awareness of the fact that they needed to be represented and connected with the non-Roma world. In the past it was unthinkable that a person respected by Roma people would speak with people of non-Roma origins about matters important for the community. Nowadays, this is common not only because of the low status of Roma people in majority societies, but also due to the possibility to acquire grants for activities addressed to this community. In order to make use of them, public activity and contacts with representatives of government or other institutions providing financial grants are needed. This activism is currently not possible without ability to make use of benefits of the contemporary world, in particular the Internet and social media playing an important role in the process of transformation within the area of awareness and public activism among Roma people. Let me mention the TV and radio programmes Roma people take part in. They usually comment on current events or popularize Roma culture to non-Roma viewers and listeners.<sup>32</sup> On the Internet you can also find films showing meetings of Roma people with the Shero Rom.<sup>33</sup>

Another issue worth analyzing in the context of growing awareness of the enormous role of social media among Roma people is that of conflict resolution. As it turns out, the Internet is not only a place where you can present your opinion as part of a certain argument, but also gain allies by publishing comments or short videos presenting opinions of certain persons who usually are involved in conflicts. As a result, information is rapidly transmitted to a wide audience, so we can conclude that the Internet is becoming a very important tool helping to build coalitions or broadly defined support from a community, as not all information passed in the aforesaid materials is presented on websites of Roma organizations. As already mentioned, many of the aforesaid websites publish information on organizational activities also in the Romani language, which was once considered unthinkable and even if did happen, would be treated as a betrayal of Roma rules and severely punished. Nowadays, it is not only a way to popularize activities of Roma leaders and organizations, but also a method to obtain support for their activities from the Roma community, in particular people using the Internet who communicate information to those who do not use this medium, although their number is gradually decreasing, as even if they do not have computers, they have smartphones and thus immediate access to information. This immediate access and reaching large groups of recipients results in the Internet entering Roma lives in a gradually demonstrable and aggressive way, because in conflict situations this provides an opportunity to comment or present one's opinion on a certain matter and also helps to popularize activism or successes of persons and organizations, so it is an important and strong tool to build alliances. According to Roma people, this is a fundamental

<sup>32</sup> E.g. <<http://dziendobry.tvn.pl/wideo,2064,n/don-vasyl-ore-ore,241131.html>>, 17 October 2017; <<http://pytanielnasniadanie.tvp.pl/24811167/dzis-miedzynarodowy-dzien-romow>>, 17 October 2017.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0q\\_-sNLo8No](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0q_-sNLo8No)>, 17 October 2017.

issue, as representation is literally impossible without approval from the community. It is also important for activities of Roma people or organizations cooperating with representatives of government or other important institutions, as they gradually become more aware that a leader can do little without Roma support, so a decision to grant or reject financial assets is also related to a position of Roma representatives and organizations within the community. Unfortunately, the activism of Roma representatives has also a negative impact on Roma communities, as it strengthens divisions among Roma people and undermines the structure inside the community. Content published on the YouTube or Facebook platforms often becomes a source of conflicts and public arguments, as well as mutual backbiting or even insults. On the other hand, the Shero Rom, who in theory is obliged to protect Roma rules, can be seen in Internet videos discussing matters important for the community. As a result, ancient rules related to cultural standards separating the Roma and the non-Roma worlds become redefined, and this is surely an unfinished process.<sup>34</sup>

Media, including the Internet, are a zone important not only in the context of activism of Roma leaders and organizations, but also with reference to people who want to fight against the negative image of Roma people in public space, regardless of membership or lack of membership in Roma organizations. One initiative worth mentioning is the group called Roma Reality, established in 2017 on the Instagram platform, on which for several months people of Roma origins have been hosting photographs from the past and present times. Some of them have short descriptions, mostly in English, probably to make them understandable for the widest possible audience. The same function is played by hashtags,<sup>35</sup> like #RomaReality, #GypsyMyth or #opreroma, attached to each photograph.

Roma Reality is an open group, and photographs are posted by people of Roma origins from various countries. The descriptions of the purposes of the initiative<sup>36</sup> and encouraging the use of the #RomaReality and #GypsyMyth hashtags prove that publicly sharing photographs of Roma people in various and common situations is an answer to their stigmatizing and stereotypical image in the media. This is not a new or isolated phenomenon. Persons who wish to have any influence on content posted in e-media about themselves post photographs depicting important events, often with comments. Considering the power of the Internet, these actions are significantly beneficial. It should be underlined that among those who initiate them are also artists and celebrities who are often exposed to fake information about themselves. It is difficult to say

<sup>34</sup> E.g. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0q\\_-sNLo8No](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0q_-sNLo8No), 17 October 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Hashtag – a word or expression without a space, preceded with the # symbol (hash), being the form of a tag. Short pieces of information posted in microblogs and such social media platforms as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram can be tagged by adding a hash before important words (with no space), or be used in a sentence. Hashtags are used to group news, because it is possible to search messages including a given hashtag. Searching can be performed only in a single platform, so a hashtag cannot be linked to messages from another platform – <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hashtag>.

<sup>36</sup> Photos from ordinary Roma/“Gypsy” people documenting their own lives. Use #RomaReality & #GypsyMyth

whether or to what extent these activities will influence overcoming the negative image of Roma people, as the popularity of these group profiles on social media is much less than that of celebrities.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth observing the development of activities the groups initiate and their influence on the image of Roma people.

Another interesting issue is that of the television series and reality shows Roma people participate in, namely three American productions called "American Gypsies",<sup>38</sup> "My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding"<sup>39</sup> and "Gypsy Sisters",<sup>40</sup> as well as the British series "Big Fat Gypsy Weddings".<sup>41</sup> All of them are very popular, and they have some Polish viewers, but unfortunately it is difficult to conclude whether these productions are of any help in the fight against negative stereotypes of Roma people. On the contrary, it seems that the Roma people starring in them do not have such ambitions themselves, as gaining popularity and fame are more important to them. Although the series/reality shows describe themselves as popularizing the Roma world among viewers, this does not happen at all. Attention is drawn to stereotypical behaviour, and their lives are shown as limited to the selection of a wedding dress, as marriage is a goal in itself, and arguments or conversations about money. This is a very superficial and hurtful way to depict Roma people, especially as there is no alternative available in the media. Although people from Roma communities star in these programmes, they result in creating no positive image of Roma people whatsoever.

Besides lighter forms such as reality shows and series, and groups posting photographs depicting Roma lifestyles, the Internet has become a place of activism in the field of highly sensitive, especially for conservative groups, social and cultural issues, namely activities of LGBT communities and establishing contacts between women and men in Roma communities. The issue of sexual orientation is a taboo within Roma communities and is not discussed on the academic level. Nevertheless, in observing the growing activity of non-heterosexual persons of Roma origins and supportive groups (including young Roma leaders), we can surely conclude that the Internet and social media are beneficial for this purpose. It is possible to remain anonymous and to share information on initiatives, articles, publications, etc. that persons belonging to the group may become interested in. This is also beneficial for those who decide to express their opinions in matters important to them despite ostracism, lack of acceptance and confrontation with their relatives and the community they come from.

Observing the content of Facebook and Twitter groups such as LGBTIQ Roma,<sup>42</sup> it is apparent that they are international and closed groups, meaning that a person wishing to belong to them must be accepted by administrators. We can assume the goal is to

<sup>37</sup> The Roma Reality group is observed by 234 people and has 577 subscribers. As of October 9, 2017 it had published 65 posts.

<sup>38</sup> <<http://www.natgeotv.com/pl/cyganie-w-wielkim-miescie/info>>, 17 October 2017.

<sup>39</sup> <<http://www.tlcpolska.pl/programy/wielkie-wesela-amerykanskich-romow/>>, 17 October 2017.

<sup>40</sup> <<http://www.tlcpolska.pl/programy/cyganskiesiostry/>>, 17 October 2017.

<sup>41</sup> <<http://www.tlcpolska.pl/programy/moje-wielkie-cyganskiewesele/>>, 17 October 2017.

<sup>42</sup> See e.g. <[http://twitter.com/LGBTIQ\\_Roma](http://twitter.com/LGBTIQ_Roma)>, 16 October 2017.



provide anonymity for its members and minimize the risk of posting negative or vulgar content. Content published on the group profile consists of articles,<sup>43</sup> interviews and information on initiatives of Roma LGBT communities and their cooperation with Roma and non-Roma activists and organizations, as there are more and more discussion panels and conferences<sup>44</sup> related to Roma LGBT communities. Roma activists, especially younger ones, are included in these activities, including heterosexuals who are aware of what human rights and double discrimination are and want to support actions to overcome this taboo among Roma communities. Let me cite here the Roma activist from Hungary who published the following post on her Facebook profile on the conference called "Nothing about us without us" organized in Hungary in 2014: *After 20 years in Roma activism and research, I am finally sitting in the audience of a panel dedicated to Roma LGBT rights! This is a real achievement.* This and many more similar posts prove that the discussion on these problems has been present on the Internet for some time, so it can be assumed that the debate on crossing borders in culture will be started by Roma people themselves more often and in a braver way, not only in virtual reality but also in real life.

When it comes to rules to be observed within Roma groups and changes in how contacts are established, another sensitive and fundamental issue is the relations between women and men. This sphere is very delicate and related to multiple limitations defined within Roma communities. In conservative groups such as Polska Roma or Sinti, contacts between women and men before marriage are not recommended or are even forbidden.<sup>45</sup> Observance of these rules is supervised by the elderly and parents, although if supervision in real life is possible, it cannot be assured in the virtual reality of young people, as proven by various Internet forums and dating portals designed for Roma people. I have not performed research on the most popular dating portals such as Sympatia.pl, as I chose to focus only on dating sites designed exclusively for Roma people,<sup>46</sup> which are rather unknown to non-Roma communities. These portals are divided by countries and groups of Roma people,<sup>47</sup> so it is possible to befriend someone from the same group, which is important especially in groups recognized as conservative. Relations from dating portals and virtual reality are transferred to the real world, so young Roma people can avoid being controlled by the elderly, and date before getting married. It is difficult to estimate how many of these relationships last and how many of them really move into the real world. Nevertheless, we can surely admit that important rules and limitations on relations between women and men are becoming more lax. It is easy to stay anonymous on the Internet, especially when young people

<sup>43</sup> E.g. <[https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/yw3zpg/roma-lgbtq-people-talk-about-the-challenges-of-facing-double-discrimination](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/yw3zpg/roma-lgbtq-people-talk-about-the-challenges-of-facing-double-discrimination)>, 17 October 2017.

<sup>44</sup> "Nothing about us without us" – Hungary 2014.

<sup>45</sup> More information: e.g. A. Kowarska, *Polska Roma. Tradycja i nowoczesność*, Warszawa 2005.

<sup>46</sup> Upon the request of my respondents, I decided not to disclose the Internet address of Roma dating portals.

<sup>47</sup> See: M. Kicińska, "Całowałaś się już z chłopakiem \_dior87?", *Dialog-Pheniben*, no. 3 (2011).

use aliases, so supervision by the community is difficult. All these factors help to establish virtual contacts and minimize the risk of being accused of breaking the rules to be observed in Roma groups.

These examples are surely not the only ones that could be described in the context of changes occurring in Roma cultures as a result of the influence of new technologies, in particular electronic media and the still growing popularity of social media. The process started some time ago will surely continue, and its results are difficult to anticipate. According to many scientists and experts, new technologies are changing our lives, societies and cultures, including Roma cultures. Currently, it is difficult to anticipate what the consequences of these changes will be, as it is too early for that; however these processes are surely worth observing, especially since they are quite dynamic and coupled with other economic or political factors. Moreover, social control is hardly possible, because Internet activities are anonymous. Young people who think differently than the older generation do not need to confront the elderly, because they can use aliases, so they spread their opinions fearlessly, belong to various coalitions, post photographs and information and establish contacts without the supervision of other people. This characteristic feeling of freedom in virtual reality surely encourages activism which will be reflected in real life sooner or later, as has been proven by the issue of double discrimination against non-heterosexual Roma people, as well as shifting the limits defining standards observed in Roma groups, being the foundation of Romanipen and mentioned when describing cultural approaches to the Roma identity.

The activity of the Shero Rom on the Internet is a signal that such a way of activism and popularization of the activity of persons and organizations is not only possible, but also approved. All this proves that the awareness of electronic media among Roma people is growing. It is obvious this process cannot be stopped, and Roma people will use these assets and new life patterns they provide, as they are citizens of countries they live in. What impact will it have on them? How will it influence relations with the majority society? These questions are still unanswered despite some suggestions we already may have. Nevertheless, it is justified to assume that Roma communities will become more dissolved within majority societies.

So, will living in the 'global village', globalization and all its consequences related to lifestyle unification result in all of us being the same? Despite awareness of the benefits resulting from new technologies intensifying these processes, many fears arise. Differences related to each sphere of human life arouse various emotions and spark controversies, although they simultaneously enrich our lives in all aspects, so diversity is valuable, including Roma communities present in almost all counties, despite awareness of how many difficulties it brings. Following this path, let us cite the famous British political expert Robert Cooper, who, when speaking of life within global and boundary-free communication, said *people will be able to wear the same jeans, eat the same hamburgers or even speak the same global language; however their thoughts are not and will not be same*.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> P. Cooper, *Pęknięcie granic. Porządek i chaos w XXI w.*, Poznań 2005, p. 116.

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